

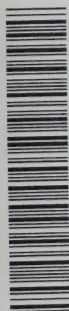
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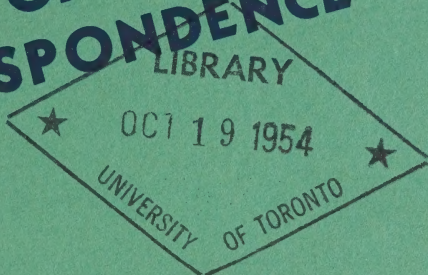
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Canada, Transport, Dept.  
of. Personnel Branch

**THE PREPARATION  
OF  
CORRESPONDENCE**



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*By:*

**THE TRAINING & WELFARE  
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CANADA

**DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT**





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## A NOTE ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

This booklet has been designed to act as a "refresher" for those members of the Department of Transport who have completed a course on "The Preparation of Correspondence".

This course is presented by the Personnel Training and Welfare Section, and consists of twelve intensive hours of group study, covering a wide range of the various aspects of correspondence. This booklet will allow members to review the salient features of the course at leisure. It should also prove useful as a ready reference.

Where actual examples of correspondence appear, unless otherwise stated, the material has been drawn from files of either this Department or of other Government Agencies.

From time to time, excerpts from various publications are included in the text. For a more comprehensive survey of the whole subject, the reader is invited to refer to Foerster and Steadman's "Writing and Thinking", Sir Ernest Gowers' "Plain Words" and "The ABC of Plain Words", and Fowler's "Modern English Usage".

It is hoped that you enjoyed the course that you have completed and that it has proved of value to you in the conduct of your work.

# THE PREPARATION OF CORRESPONDENCE

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## INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of a course on "The Preparation of Correspondence", it is our practice to make some general remarks on the relationship of writing and Government, and to link the significance of the written word to the work we do as Civil Servants. This is a brief summary of what you heard at the beginning of the first two-hour session.

Long before the discovery of the telephone, the telegraph, the teletype and radio, the written word was, next to speech, the most basic means of communication. Ancient civilizations crystallized their culture and their law on stone, so that a permanent record could be established and referred to. Others put their official rulings on brick, so that they could be filed. (It would appear that, in those days, the preliminary qualification for a filing clerk was an extremely strong back!)

In earlier times speech alone had served to pass custom and law from generation to generation, which inevitably caused great changes in interpretation through the years. In this respect the written word was immeasurably superior to speech, and it is noteworthy that many of the great directives that founded our civilization, because they were written, have come down to us today practically intact.

The discovery of paper, in the ancient form of papyrus, and an indelible form of ink, went hand in hand with the greatness of the ancient Egyptian civilization, a brilliant era famous for one of the most efficient Civil Service organizations in history. During the Roman Age, even the Heads of Departments were technically slaves of the Emperor, but they gained great power for themselves by the invention of a shorthand method known only among the scribes. They operated a vast Civil Service organization by means of minutes and memoranda in this secret shorthand.

It is worthy of note that again and again the term "scribe" or "writer" has been synonymous with "Civil Servant". The Honourable East India Company governed India for many years: their Civil Servants were known as "Writers to the Honourable East India Company". Even today, the classification of "writer" in the Navy provides the basic training for commissioning in the Administrative Branch of the R.C.N.

Many famous men have stated that the greatest basic invention underlying our civilization was the development of the printing press. This discovery brought about the widest dissemination of the written word. It is a fact that we have hardly any record of the speech, manners, customs, or laws of our ancestors during the Dark Ages. One of the major reasons for this great gap in our history was the loss of the art of making writing materials, and the consequent deterioration of scholarship and government. When we came into the Middle Ages, and paper and inks again became available, civilization again flourished, and with Caxton and his press it flourished at a rate unique since the ancient Greeks.

Let us remember that today this Department is partially operating on Directives written by Parliaments and Civil Servants now dead. Their written word still lives.



## CHAPTER ONE

### LETTER WRITING

As we have shown in the Introduction, written correspondence is still the main means of organizing, informing, administering, and recording, in spite of the marvelous new methods of communication in use today. One of the principal forms of correspondence is the letter, a type of communication which has assumed increasing importance with the growth of public affairs administered by Government.

#### EFFECT OF LETTERS ON THE INDIVIDUAL:

Let us first examine those letters which we write to the public. We must realize that the citizens of this country judge the Civil Service to a great extent by the tone, appearance, clarity, and the completeness of information, contained in the letters they receive from us. Because Civil Servants have very few personal contacts with the general public in comparison to the number of letters that they write to individuals or business firms, we must regard our letters as substitutes for the personal interview. If we write pompous, ungrammatical, "woolly," over-written, or rude letters to the citizens of this country, we can undermine their faith in us and their respect for their Government as a whole. In writing to the general public we have an individual responsibility to regard our letters as "Ambassadors of Good Will." Even when a request cannot be fully complied with, a courteous reply creates an understanding response.

It is also the tradition of our Service to show un-failing courtesy in correspondence within our own Department, and to members of other Governmental agencies.

The Civil Servant should never permit personal impatience or irritation to result in brusqueness or discourtesy in any contact with the public or another Government employee.

## THE "5-C CHECK":

On one side of the card you received during the first session of your course was the "5-C Check", an excellent method of reviewing a letter before dispatching it.

Is it Complete?

Is it Concise?

Is it Clear?

Is it Correct?

Is it Courteous?

A letter that will stand scrutiny on all five checkpoints is a good letter: it will attain your objective: it will help your correspondent.

## THE COMPONENTS OF A LETTER:

All types of letters written by Government employees can be examined under the headings of Content, Plan, Style, and Layout.

## THE CONTENT OF A LETTER:

A letter normally deals with one subject and has a definite object. Both the subject and object must be kept clearly in the writer's mind, so that the reader may proceed from salutation to signature with a clear impression of the letter's purpose. If this result is not achieved, the letter lacks unity and is ineffective at the very least; it may even be misleading. It is important that a letter should not only be understood, but that it should not be misunderstood.

## PLANNING A LETTER:

To write clearly, a person must think clearly. Without sufficient preparation we are in danger of producing one of those "woolly", disconnected, foggily-phrased and generally slip-shod letters, which bewilder the recipient



and usually entail an unnecessary exchange of correspondence.

Economy alone is a factor when considering the problem of poor planning. An investigation in one organization, with a weekly output of 6,000 letters, disclosed the fact that 35% of the material in the letters reviewed was unnecessary -- a waste of approximately \$1,600 per week. An investigation in another Agency set the average cost of a letter as high as seventy-five cents.

In planning a letter, we must first get the facts. We should review the record and check what rules and customs apply. We should be sure we have the whole story.

In preparing for dictation we should look up all references required, make essential notes, arrange our papers in logical sequence, and have all necessary files and papers at hand.

#### STYLE IN LETTER WRITING:

Style, in any form of writing, has always been difficult to describe. It is closely related to personality, and is not easily passed from one to another. It involves our understanding of people and our attitude to them.

The style of a letter should be smooth and easy, and designed to encourage the reader's receptiveness. It should NOT contain the stilted, redundant, meaningless phraseology which too often mars many business letters. It should contain simple and clear cut words and phrases readily understood by any reader.

A good rule in letter writing is to put yourself in the place of the reader, and write the kind of letter you would like to receive.

#### LAYOUT:

In order that letters may be properly checked before being sent, it is necessary that writers have a thorough

understanding of "layout," as practised in this Department. The rules concerning placement of date lines, addresses, attention lines, file references, types of paper and letterhead, number and disposal of copies etc., come under the heading of "Correspondence Procedure" and may be found in Departmental Circular No. 3.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REPORTS AND PRÉCIS

#### REPORTS:

One of the most important characteristics of a good report is brevity, and the more important the person for whom the report is intended, the briefer it should be. Executives are busy people, and they do not have the time to read long-winded, over-written, and involved memoranda.

#### "EDITING" THE REPORT:

In order to get the required brevity, a report writer should cultivate the "editorial" mind and learn to "blue pencil" the draft copy ruthlessly, striking out as many unessential words and expressions as possible. The finished product should be stream-lined, taut, and vigorous.

An example: "Considerable practical difficulties militate against the suggestion being put into effect."

A good report writer would immediately strike out this whole phrase and replace it with a sentence of this nature:

"This suggestion will not work."

#### SEQUENCE OF PARAGRAPHS:

A report differs from a letter in some important respects, one of them being the function of the opening paragraph: it is usually desirable to remind the reader of the events which led to the report.

The relevant facts brought out in a report should be arranged so that one leads to another in ascending order of importance and can be grasped by the reader promptly and completely. The opening sentence of each paragraph should sum up its main theme and the language throughout should be so simple that reference to a dictionary should NOT be necessary.



If the facts and paragraphs of a report are in their proper sequence, they should lead to a natural climax, thus giving the writer an appropriate opportunity to present a significant conclusion or a recommendation.

### PRÉCIS:

The term "précis" is taken from the French language, and its literal meaning is "abstract" or "summary." The main function of the précis is to cut to the heart of a document so that the salient facts contained in reports, memoranda, letters, etc., can be read and digested quickly by the busy executive.

In some ways, this type of writing is the most difficult to master. It is likely that anyone who can produce a good précis will be an excellent all-round writer of the of the types of correspondence required by Government.

Précis writing demands accuracy and clarity of the highest order. Clarity requires straightforward expression, and accurate presentation of the facts compels thoughtful study of the original. Under no circumstances should a précis be colored by the opinions of its writer.

The aim in précis writing is to state the heart of the matter in words of our own choosing, never rearranging thoughts or facts, but reproducing them faithfully in condensation. Normally, the précis should be about one-third as long as the original.

## CHAPTER THREE

### TELEGRAMS & TELETYPES

Telegrams constitute a large portion of the correspondence of this Department; consequently, our technique of telegram writing should be carefully examined.

#### TELEGRAM REQUIREMENTS:

The three main requirements concerning the sending of telegrams are:

- (1) Clarity
- (2) Economy
- (3) Necessity

Because of the need to cut down wordage in telegrams, it is essential that the writer assures himself that the text of his message will be instantly clear to the recipient.

#### TYPES OF TELEGRAMS:

Many people do not understand fully the various forms of message offered by the telegraph companies. Here is a list of the available services, using Ottawa to Winnipeg as an example:

##### Straight Telegram:

A flat charge for each ten word group, plus an additional charge for each word under ten (e.g. 10 words, Ottawa to Winnipeg, \$1.20).

##### Day Letter:

A flat charge for 50 words or less, of 1½ times the rate for a ten word straight telegram, (e.g. 50 words, Ottawa to Winnipeg, \$1.80). One fifth of the charge is added for each additional ten-word group, or portion of a group. (e.g. 60 words, Ottawa to Winnipeg, \$2.16. 65 words, Ottawa to Winnipeg, \$2.52.)

### Night Letter:

A flat charge for 50 words or less, of the same rate as for a ten word straight telegram. (e.g. 50 words, Ottawa to Winnipeg, \$1.20.) One fifth of the charge is added for each additional ten-word group, or portion of a group. (e.g. 60 words, Ottawa to Winnipeg, \$1.44, 62 words, Ottawa to Winnipeg, \$1.68.)

It should be noted that the companies count the written word "stop" as a chargeable word. If the writer indicates a period by a full stop (.), or states "period" verbally on the telephone, it will be sent without charge.

### TELEGRAM ECONOMY:

Our Departmental bill for telegrams is considerable, therefore it is surely our responsibility to examine our telegram traffic from an economy point of view. Here are some actual samples:

A Day Letter: "REMYTEL TWENTY SIXTH MARCH PLAN TO ARRIVE VANCOUVER TOMORROW AND WILL GET IN TOUCH WITH YOU BY PHONE TO ARRANGE MEETING AT CONVENIENT TIME."

If the writer had condensed this day letter of twenty-four words to ten, he would have saved the additional 50% of the straight wire charge, and his message would have been delivered much more quickly. Here are two suggested changes that would effect this saving:

"EXPECT ARRIVE VANCOUVER TOMORROW WILL PHONE CONCERNING MEETING." (8 words.)

"REMYTEL TWENTY SIXTH ARRIVING VANCOUVER TOMORROW WILL PHONE REGARDING MEETING" (10 words.)

Another Day Letter (15 words): "REMYLET MARCH FIFTEENTH PLEASE FURNISH INFORMATION REQUESTED REFERENCE YOUR REQUISITION NUMBER NUMBER NUMBER NUMBER"



NUMBER." (Each number has to be spelled out, counting as an individual word.)

Suggested Change (10 words): "REMYLET FIFTEENTH INFORMATION REQUESTED REQUISITION NUMBER NUMBER NUMBER NUMBER NUMBER."

You will remember that on your course we took an actual day letter of 82 words and deleted 22 of them, without harming the sense in the least. This revised copy would have saved three-fifths of the straight wire charge to the destination.

Many telegrams are sent towards the close of the working day; many are sent without reference to the time zone of the recipient; still more are sent at the end of the week and cannot possibly be delivered before the following Monday. Also, many members of the Department are not aware of the extremely fast service offered by airmail - special delivery. There is no doubt that many telegrams may be regarded as "lazy men's letters "

#### THE TIME ZONE:

As every Departmental location is affected by the time zone problem, on one occasion or another, let us examine the question as it affects the sending of telegrams.

Supposing we are in Ottawa at 3:00 p.m., E.S.T., during a normal working day, and that it is necessary to communicate urgently with Vancouver, and Moncton. Checking our Time Zones, we find that it is 12:00 p.m. P.S.T. in Vancouver, and that at least 4 hours of the working day (excluding the lunch period) remain for them to receive and act upon a straight telegram, or even a day letter. On again checking the Time Zones, we find that it is 4:00 p.m. A.S.T. at Moncton, with approximately one hour of the working day left.

We may consider ourselves justified in sending a telegram to Vancouver, and a night letter to Moncton.

Should the day concerned be a Friday, and if the units with which we are communicating are on a five-day week, we should consider sending an Air Mail Special Delivery letter to both Vancouver and Moncton, for Monday morning reception, requesting a reply by telegram.

The offices at Moncton and Vancouver now face a similar problem in selecting the type of telegram they will send in reply.

#### TELETYPE MESSAGES:

The same need for brevity that exists where telegrams are sent, applies equally to the transmission of teletype messages, as circuits can become greatly overloaded. Again, we should be watchful that we don't send a teletype when a letter will do the job.

In this connection, your attention is drawn to the various circular letters issued by the Director of Air Services with respect to the use of the Meteorological teletype circuits.

#### SUMMARY:

If we always take into account clarity, economy, and necessity, our telegrams and teletypes will improve, and a considerable saving of money will be effected.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### WRITING FAULTS

Professional writing covers a wide field, extending from business letters to poetry. Although the various types of composition present different problems in technique, they have in common the writing "fault". It is unlikely that anyone will ever write a "perfect" letter or a "perfect" newspaper article, but with care, thought, and some effort, we can improve our standard of correspondence. There is even a selfish motive for so doing. Your correspondence provides your supervisor with an easy method of evaluating many of your personal characteristics.

#### SURVEYING OUR CORRESPONDENCE:

During your course you saw numerous examples of actual correspondence, illustrating the various "faults" which mar our writing. Many of these samples were presented as a direct result of a study of Departmental correspondence. This survey showed that while many letters are well written, and a credit to the Department, others could be much improved.

Many similar surveys have revealed a noticeable weakness in spelling, grammar, and punctuation, and our Department is no exception. It is unfortunate that some of our letters still contain "official jargon", the meaningless phrase, and the long, winding "warming-up" phrase.

#### CHECKING CORRESPONDENCE:

A great many letters and memoranda are dictated by one person and signed by another, thus furnishing a three-way check of the final draft: by the stenographer, the writer, and the signer. It would be thought that a typographical error, an omission, a misspelling, or an error in punctuation, would be screened out in a three-way check: that this is not always the case may be shown by the following excerpts from letters on file:



"On April 21st you were forwarded several accounts which the ----- Company was making enquiries."

"On reading the pamphlet "Our Job with the Department of Transport" it was decided further information on several subjects covered in it."

"This typewriter was delivered to ----- on -----, and on packing it became evident that the typewriter was damaged ----- presumably return the old platen shaft to you to clear your records."

"If you would check further as to delivery of this item and confirm it as not been received."

"Reference is made to our teletype message of ---- wherein authority was granted to install a wall party-line telephone in the -----'s residence were requested."

In each of these examples, the obvious failure to check before despatch has allowed letters to go out with their meaning considerably distorted. Only the native good sense of the recipient could prevent an error being committed or an unnecessary exchange of correspondence.

#### UNNECESSARY PHRASES:

Here are examples, taken from our correspondence files, of the meaningless phrase and the long unnecessary phrase:

"As the matter is considered to be urgent, I have to inform you that an instruction should be given to the effect that the required action should be taken before 31st next."

"Your kind attention to the above noted matter would be greatly appreciated."

"With further reference to yours dated -----17th, I beg to enclose, herewith, copy of a self-explanatory letter received from -----, in reply to mine addressed to him, requesting the information desired by you."

"Reference is made to your communication dated 14th instant relative to the above noted subject

and in reply you are advised that it will be in order for you to arrange ----- "

This type of writing is opaque: clarity sinks beneath the muffling pomposity of such sentences. Sir Ernest Gowers, in a book written for British Civil Servants, borrows a phrase from the United States to describe it: "Gobbledygook". Here is an extract giving examples:

EXAMPLE

An essential prerequisite to the adequate fulfilment of the dual functions of research and teaching is an atmosphere of freedom and progress.

There is a complete lack of ablution facilities.

In the initial stages.

Circumstances which obtained prior to the outbreak of hostilities.

If they make a nil determination of need.

Was this the realization of an anticipated liability?

The position regarding this matter is that owing to the fact that two claims were made by two claimants of the same name some confusion arose.

TRANSLATION:

Teaching and Research can only be adequately carried on in an atmosphere of freedom and progress.

There is nowhere to wash.

At first.

Conditions before the war.

If they decide there is no case for giving anything.

Did you expect that you would have to do this?

Confusion arose because there were two claimants with the same name.

I should be glad if you would be good enough to confirm the settlement and it would be of assistance to me if you are prepared to state the terms thereof and the approximate proportion of the full claim which settlement represents.

Having regard to these different considerations and the evidence available, the general conclusion in the light of the latest investigation is that there is no definite scientific justification either for national measures aimed at reducing appreciably the rook population or for encouraging its increase .... This accords with what is understood to be the Ministry's present attitude to the rook.

I would suggest therefore that this firm's production from an output point of view is determined with regard to each of these main headings, and then it would be advisable to approach Mr. X so that he may have this firm's requirements considered by the correct departments.

Will you please confirm the settlement. It would help me if you tell me its terms, and how the amount compares with your full claim.

All this leads us to the conclusion that no case can be made out for encouraging either the killing of rooks or their protection. This, we understand, accords with the Ministry's present policy.

I suggest that this firm's output should be stated under these headings and referred to Mr. X so that he may have their requirements considered by the right departments.



(This illustrates the tendency of phrases like "point of view" and "with regard to" to produce "woolly" writing. Here "production from an output point of view" means no more than "output" and "determined with regard to these headings" means "stated under these headings".)

The Committee have decided to grant the application, subject to the exclusion of the provision of general medical services by you in those parts of the . . . area where the Committee declared the number of doctors to be adequate ... Such restriction is subject to the right of appeal against the decision of the Committee to the Minister.

In this connection I am to say that before the Department can assess the value of the plant, it will be necessary for them to receive from you, through this office, details of the items in question rendered on the appropriate forms. It would be appreciated therefore if you would complete the enclosed form with the required information, and return the schedule in quintuplicate to this office at the above address.

The Committee grant you leave to practice except in those parts of the area where they have declared the number of doctors to be adequate. You have the right to appeal to the Minister against this limitation.

Before the Department can assess the value of the plant they must have details of it on the appropriate forms. Will you, therefore, please complete the enclosed form and return it with five copies of the schedule.

The following example and the suggested translation of it are taken from the Municipal Review:

The object of sifting these waiting lists is to ascertain the existing live demand for houses required to meet the needs of families who are not satisfactorily housed and also to secure that the lists are not inflated by retention on them of those who, since their application, have removed from the district, have found accommodation for themselves, or for other reasons do not now desire to be considered.

These lists should be sifted to find out how many families still want houses and to eliminate those who no longer need or wish to be considered.

The following is from the British Medical Journal:

Imitation "legalese" is far more annoying to read than the genuine article, yet it abounds in letters running on administrative errands throughout the health service. A correspondent tells us that a regional hospital board sent him a letter asking him to certify that the candidate for a job "is free from any physical defect or disease which now impairs her capacity satisfactorily to undertake the duties of the post for which she is a candidate". The writer of the letter apparently quoted this curious phrase from another document, presumably because he felt that he would be sailing across an uncharted sea if he asked our correspondent to certify that the candidate was fit for the job.

Lastly, a piece of gobbledygook that defies translation:

"To reduce the risk of war and establish conditions of lasting peace requires the closer co-ordination in the employment of their joint resources to underpin these countries' economics in such a manner as to permit the full maintenance of their social and material standards as well as to adequate development of the necessary measures."

## OBSCURITY AND CLARITY:

Excellent examples of obscurity and clarity can be taken from the following quotations:

- (a) "The non-compensable evaluation heretofore assigned to you for your service-connected disability is confirmed and continued."
- (b) "Postmasters are neither bound to give change nor authorized to demand it."

Both of these quotations were written for, or to, ordinary readers, not experts. The Civil Servant who wrote (a) knew exactly what he wanted to say; the obscurity of meaning was not in his thoughts, but in his way of expressing them.

Example (b) was composed by an unknown member of the Post Office Staff (in Great Britain) who used twelve words to express a directive banishing what had always been an unmanageable situation.

The fault of the writing in the first example is not that it is unscholarly, but that it is puzzling, and time wasting to the reader.

## CLUMSY PHRASES

There is a type of phrase haunting some of our correspondence that is technically known as "infelicitous". It is the unhappy, clumsy phrase, unsuitable, discordant, and inept, that creeps in to mar the clarity of our letters. Usually these result from carelessness or lack of good writing taste. Here are some actual samples:

"It is requested that you complete and submit the attached report and submit it to this office in duplicate at your earliest convenience." (Duplication of "submit.")

"To date, we do not appear to have received this information and would appreciate a reply to my

letter as quickly as possible." (Omission of a second "we" before "would" causes an apparent change of person.)

"Your efforts to remedy this situation would be very much appreciated as ----- is reluctant to revert to the original assignment for reasons of which it is known you are aware." ("For reasons of which it is known you are aware" is a most "unhappy" phrase.") "This was requested in our telegram above referred to." (No comment is necessary)

"Attached for your information and guidance of all concerned in your district ---- It will be observed that it is now necessary that an additional copy of ----and other information is furnished these Headquarters ----." (The addition of "the" before "guidance" would save the phrase "for your information and guidance of all concerned", always provided that we wish to save it. The fact that the attachment to the letter is for information and guidance is implicit. The use of the word "is" before "furnished" is a glaring grammatical error. It should be replaced by "be", or "to be" should follow it. "These" Headquarters should be This Headquarters.)

#### FAULTY PUNCTUATION:

Let us now look at examples of faulty or non-existent punctuation:

"Two gasoline launches stood by the "Ship" a fast cruiser capable of navigating through the rapids to serve the vessel party and the canal work boat to serve the shore parties".

"The attached invoices in favour of ---- in the amounts of ---- appear to be applicable to an order, therefore, it is requested that, etc."



The first example contains no punctuation except the period at the end of the sentence, and illustrates the grave danger that a complete misunderstanding may be transmitted in such a communication. It would appear that "Ship" was in difficulties and that two other vessels were standing by. When we insert the missing punctuation, we get a much different picture of events.

"Two gasoline launches stood by; the "Ship", a fast cruiser capable of navigating through the rapids, to serve the vessel party, and the canal work boat to serve the shore parties."

In the second example, two sentences have been run together by the faulty use of a comma before "therefore". If we eliminate "therefore" and its two commas, and place a period after "order", our paragraph becomes bearable.

#### UNNECESSARY INFORMATION:

Another type of letter fault that is quite prevalent is the habit of repeating back to a correspondent what he has told us in his letter.

Here is an example of unnecessary information. It will be noted that the first paragraph, which is the longer of the two, contains known information which is given by the sender in full.

In your letter of ----- you informed us that a new procedure for obtaining information required by various Government Agencies co-operating with this Department, in greater or lesser degree, had been implemented. This procedure required that the Heads of Units in the field be responsible for promulgating the desired regulations throughout their Districts and requesting returns and nil returns, by a date specified by your Headquarters. You now state that this procedure has failed to function adequately, due to the delay in receiving, correlating, and processing the desired information.

It is suggested that Headquarters might obtain this information more expeditiously through reference to existing records, which have been maintained in this Headquarters for some time past.

#### UNNECESSARY PARAGRAPHS:

Mention was made earlier that spelling and punctuation have deteriorated in this century, and it is certainly a fact that the correspondence of preceding generations of Civil Servants shows a much higher ability in this field than exists today. There has been, however, a curious change in official correspondence over the years: Civil Servants of bygone days seemed to feel a lack of balance in their letters unless they got on to page 2. They were addicted to the florid phrase and circumlocution: they consistently "over-wrote".

Today, the style is changed, and the short letter is in fashion. The modern letter-writer seems to have the same feeling of lack of "balance" with respect to the second paragraph that his predecessor had to the second page. Many of our letters are one paragraph too long: it seems that some writers do not feel that a one-paragraph letter is a "whole" letter, and they insist on tacking on an extra paragraph that is meaningless or redundant. Some writers add a third paragraph to a two-paragraph letter, and so on. It is another example of "padding" and should always be avoided.

We come now to the use of "jargon" in official letters, and as Sir Ernest Gowers has a very masterly discussion of this subject in his book, "The A.B.C. of Plain Words", we include the following excerpt:

\* \* \* \* \*

*A dictionary definition of jargon is "a word applied contemptuously to the language of scholars, the terminology of a science or art, or the cant of a class, sect, trade, or profession". When it was confined to that sense it was a useful word, but it has been handled so prom-*

iscuously of recent years that the edge has been taken off it, and now, as has been well said, it signifies little more than any speech that a person feels to be inferior to his own.

When officials are accused of writing jargon, what is usually meant is that they affect a pompous and flabby verbosity. The Americans have a pleasant word for it - "gobbledygook". It cannot be questioned that there is too much of that sort of thing in the general run of present-day writing, both official and other.

But there is also a jargon in the strict sense of the word, and official writing is not free from it. Technical terms are used - especially conventional phrases invented by a government department - which are understood inside the department but are unintelligible to outsiders. That is true jargon. A circular from the headquarters of a department to a district officer begins:

"The physical progressing of building cases should be confined to ....."

Nobody could say what meaning this was intended to convey unless he held the key\*. It is not English except in the sense that the words are English words. They are a group of symbols used in conventional senses known only to the parties to the convention. It may be said that no harm is done, because the instruction is not meant to be read by anyone unfamiliar with the departmental jargon. But using jargon is a dangerous habit; it is easy to forget that the public do not understand it, and to slip into the use of it in explaining things to them. If that is done, those seeking enlightenment will find themselves plunged in even deeper obscurity.

Let us take another example. "Distribution of industry policy" is an expression well understood in departments concerned with the subject. But it is jargon. Intrinsically the phrase has no certain meaning. Not even its grammatical construction is clear. So far as the words go, it is at least as likely that it refers to distributing something called "industry-policy" as to a policy of distributing industry. Even when we know that "distribution-of-industry" is a compound noun-adjective qualifying policy, we still do not give to the words the full meaning

that those who invented the phrase intended it to have. The meaning attached to this clump of ungrammatical nonsense is the policy of exercising governmental control over the establishment of new factories in such a way as to minimize the risk of local mass unemployment. No doubt it is convenient to have a label for anything that can only be explained so cumbrously. But it must not be forgotten that what is written on the label consists of code symbols unintelligible to the outsider. If the initiated want to communicate with those who are outside their mysteries, they must use language that everyone understands.

#### \*EXPLANATION

A member of the department has kindly given us this interpretation, qualified by the words "as far as I can discover":

" 'The physical progressing of building cases' means going at intervals to the sites of factories etc. whose building is sponsored by the department and otherwise approved, to see how many bricks have been laid since the last visit. 'Physical' apparently here exemplifies a portmanteau usage and refers both to the flesh-and-blood presence of the inspector and to the material development of the edifice, neither of which is, however, mentioned. 'Progressing' I gather should have the accent on the first syllable and should be distinguished from progressing. It means recording or helping forward the progress rather than going forward. 'Cases' is the common term for units of work which consist of applying a given set of rules to a number of individual problems . . . 'should be confined to' means that only in the type of cases specified, may an officer leave his desk to visit the site".

\* \* \* \* \*

Here are some of the common grammatical faults that obstruct clarity:



## SPLIT CONSTRUCTIONS:

The use of the split infinitive has caused much argument. However, the consensus of opinion among leading grammarians is that it should be generally avoided, unless clearness demands its use.

Such split infinitives as "to finally learn" are considered respectable. We might say: "It worried him to gradually lose the respect of the public". In this case, the placing of the adverb "gradually" between "to" and "lose" is warranted, as it clearly modifies "lose". Obviously it is a better construction than "It worried him to lose gradually the respect of the public" or "It worried him to lose the respect of the public gradually": the first variation is clumsy, and the second is misleading.

Unless a writer thoroughly understands the permissible uses of the split infinitive, he is well advised to steer clear of such dangerous ground and never split an infinitive at all.

Another common error is the splitting of closely related sentence elements.

"The speaker, being suddenly taken ill, was unable to continue his speech." Here the subject (speaker) is unnecessarily separated from the verb (was).

"He walked, with a firm, proud tread, to the dais." Here the verb is needlessly separated from the object.

We often find parts of a verb phrase that have been needlessly split.

"The aircraft that he had earlier in the morning flown to Toronto returned that night." "Had" and "flown" should not be separated in this manner.

## REFERENCE OF PRONOUNS:

It is a common fault to change the number or gender be-

tween pronoun and antecedent. Such sentences as "The group was to advise the Minister as to their requirements" occur far too frequently in our correspondence. Here "was" should be changed to "were", or "their" to "its".

This brings up the question of collectives: company, group, flock, pack, herd, choir, etc., which many writers find confusing. The rule is simple: the collective may be regarded as singular or plural, provided that the number remains constant throughout.

It is fatally easy for a pronoun to refer to a wrong antecedent. Writers get themselves into this dilemma by placing the reference word too far from the antecedent, or by allowing a pronoun to refer to two or more antecedents:

"Mr. Jones told him that he had been appointed to the position."

The obstruction to clarity there is that anyone reading this statement would be confused as to whether Mr. Jones or the other individual had been appointed. This is termed "ambiguous reference".

Where the reference is too general, we may again confuse the reader:

"While Mr. Jones was working, Mr. Smith was talking about a possible failure, and it bothered him."

In this sentence we are faced with the question: was it Mr. Smith's talk, or the possibility of a failure, that bothered Mr. Jones?

We are again in danger of obscurity when we use vague or remote references:

"Lunch is served in the restaurant; they always leave their desks at twelve."

"Mr. Jones is one of the senior officials on Mr. Smith's staff. He is an excellent judge of ability."

In the first example, "they" is too vague; we should define who "they" are (employees, etc ). In the second example, it is impossible to tell whether Mr. Jones or Mr. Smith is an excellent judge of ability.

A common letter-fault is the replacing of the pronoun by "same":

"Your report has been received and contents of same have been noted."

This should read: "Your report has been received and its contents (have been) noted."

### "AND WHICH" CLAUSES:

Many writers to-day apparently do not understand the correct use of "and which" or "and who (whom)" clauses. These must be preceded by a preliminary "which" or "who (whom)", which is often omitted in our correspondence.

"The airport, capable of handling the largest aircraft, and which was designed to accommodate a heavy traffic flow, has proved to be very successful."

This sentence, to be correct, should contain "which is" before "capable ", or "and which" before "was designed" should be omitted.

The use of "and which" clauses sometimes causes perfectly grammatical phrases to become clumsy. The unnecessary use of the word "which" and the "and which" clause should be avoided.

### "EITHER - OR":

Correlatives, such as "either ...or", "both...and", "whether...or", "neither...nor", etc., can be confusing if the two parts are widely separated. The rule is to keep them as close to one another as possible.

"Either this country, blessed with splendid waterways and navigable lakes and rivers, will utilize them to the full, or industry will eventually suffer a severe power shortage."

For clarity, "either" should be moved to a position between "will" and "utilize."

### MODIFIERS:

Clarity in writing is lost if the reader cannot immediately connect the modifier with the word that it modifies. We can avoid misunderstanding by placing every modifier so that related words come close together, and in such a manner that the relationship with the word that is modified is clearly indicated.

"The time to act, if we are to make any significant increase in production, is now."

By transferring the modifier to the beginning of the sentence we have a much clearer phrase.

"Now is the time to act if we are to make any significant increase in production."

These notes on grammatical faults that are a barrier to clarity are, of course, only "highlights". It would take a very thick book to cover the subject in its entirety. There are some excellent text-books available for those who wish to dig deeper into the subject.

### "COMPLICATED" WRITING:

A common fault in present day writing is a tendency to write in a "complicated" way. Instead of being simple, terse, and direct, our letters are often stilted, long-winded, and "technical".

In order to convey our meaning without ambiguity, and giving unnecessary trouble to our readers, we might well



study the following three rules which are the essence of the advice given on this subject by two leading authorities on English usage, Fowler and Quiller-Couch:

#### Rule I

"Use no more words than are necessary to express your meaning, for if you use more you are likely to obscure it and to tire your reader. In particular do not use superfluous adjectives and adverbs and do not use "round about" phrases where single words would serve".

#### Rule II

"Use familiar words rather than the far-fetched, for the familiar are more likely to be understood".

#### Rule III

"Use words with a precise meaning rather than those that are vague, for they will obviously serve better to make your meaning clear, and in particular prefer concrete words to abstract, for they are more likely to have a precise meaning."

#### PADDING:

A good example of the superfluous word is the incorrect or unnecessary use of the words "respective" and "respectively", "definite" and "definitely". Here are four examples:

"Controllers should inform their respective Emergency Committees....."

"Owing to the special difficulty of an apportionment of expenditure between (1) dinners and (2) other meals and refreshments respectively..."

"This is definitely harmful to the worker's health".

"The recent action of the committee in approving the definite appointment of four home visitors..."

Now let us regard examples of the superfluous phrase: the use of "with regard to", "in the case of", "in relation to", "in connection with ", etc.

The rates vary "in relation to" the	
age of the child	- "with"
Similar considerations apply "with	
regard to" application for a certificate	- "to"
The general attitude of modern industry	
"in relation to" the activities of	
Government.....	- "towards"

Here we see that a single preposition can replace the "round about" phrase, making our sentence clear and pithy. Another good illustration of this point is the replacement of "in a number of cases" by "some" and "in the majority of instances" by "most".

Padding is a temptation which affects many people writing official correspondence. The best way to eliminate the insidious padded phrase is to always re-read as an editor reads, to condense copy. Ruthlessly cut out any words or phrases unnecessary to your intended meaning.

In a wartime memorandum, Sir Winston Churchill described padding as "woolly phrases which can be left out altogether or replaced by a single, easily understood word".

#### THE PADDED WAY:

#### THE BETTER WAY:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| (a) <u>It should be noted that the</u><br>particulars of expenditure<br>etc.....    | The particulars of expend-<br>iture etc.....  |
| (b) <u>It is appreciated that ow-</u><br>ing to staffing difficult-<br>ies etc..... | Owing to staffing diffi -<br>culties etc..... |
| (c) <u>It will be noted that in</u><br>Tables one and two etc....                   | Tables one and two show<br>etc.....           |

(d) The problem is likely to continue in existence for an indefinite period ahead.

The problem is likely to continue for an indefinite period.

(e) If they do so commit themselves, they should be asked in every case to explain why they have done so.

If they do, they should be asked to explain why.

(f) The Minister has been in receipt of not a few inquiries from local authorities etc .....

The Minister has been asked by several local authorities etc.....

(g) I am to add that, doubtless, local authorities appreciate that it is a matter of prime importance that such information should reach this office with a minimum of delay.

Such information should reach this office as soon as possible.

#### ABSTRACTIONS:

Sometimes we are guilty of "wrapping" our meaning in abstractions. Here are some examples:

##### ABSTRACT:

Should, the position arise when a hospital contains a preponderance of cases etc.....

Anticipated cooler conditions will develop etc.....

The position in regard to coal stocks is considered definitely serious.

##### SIMPLE --- CONCRETE:

If a hospital gets too many cases etc.....

It will become cooler.....

Coal stocks are very low.

The wages will be low owing to the unremunerative nature of the work.

It does not pay well.

There has been considerable advocacy of air travel by many people.

Many people favour air travel.

Notwithstanding circumstances, we have absolute confidence that eventually the situation will soon be restored.

Despite this loss, we feel sure that the position will soon be won back.

Official prose is often made confusing and abstract to its readers by improper handling of the words in a phrase, sentence, or paragraph.

#### SOME BAD HABITS:

Some of the bad habits frequently found in official writing include . . . .

- (a) The separation of the subject from the verb by long intervening clauses.
- (b) Adverbs awkwardly separated from the words they qualify.
- (c) Repeating the noun and excluding the pronoun.
- (d) Improper use of the infinitive, split and otherwise.
- (e) Improper use of prepositions at the end of a sentence.
- (f) Out and out "howler" or glaring misuse of words.

Here are some examples:

Camps, the supply of which will be stimulated and the use of which as an auxiliary will be increased by plans



for their provision under the legislation of this year, will also be utilized as far as available.

The examiner's search would in all cases be carried up to the date of filing, and the examiner (he) need not trouble his head with the subject of disconformity.

A recent visit has convinced me that we fail to com-pletely recognize etc.....

It may now be surely said, more or less wholly, that the plan has reached perfection.

The subject of Mr. K's talk tonight will be about aviation.

The alternate accommodation, etc. (The alternative)

The armies are mainly comprised of civilians.

(composed)

## CHAPTER FIVE

### PUNCTUATION

Correct punctuation is absolutely essential to clarity in writing. Poor punctuation, or no punctuation at all, not only clouds the sense of what we write, but may even distort it.

There is a simple approach to this subject that many people find helpful; the association of punctuation and the inflection of the voice. When you speak, you punctuate your statements with your voice. If you imagine that you are speaking as you write, or if you are actually dictating, allow a comma to represent a very short vocal pause; a semi-colon to represent a longer pause; a full colon to represent an even longer pause; a period to represent a full stop.

#### THE COMMA:

1. The main uses of the comma are:

To separate a distantly related relative clause from the principal clause:

"This unit, which is supervised by a woman, is unusually well run." In this example, the relative clause "which is supervised by a woman" is distantly related in that it may be removed without spoiling the meaning of the sentence. When the relative clause is closely related to the principal clause, the commas may be omitted: "This is the only unit whose supervisor is a woman."

2. To separate the items in a series:

"He visited Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, and Vancouver." It is considered good usage, where a series of more than two words occurs, to place a comma before the conjunction "and".

3. To separate parenthetic expressions:

"His conduct, however, has been excellent." This course does not advocate the use of parenthetic expressions: this is, nevertheless, one of the uses of the comma.

4. To separate a dependent clause that precedes a principal clause: "When he arrived, the ship was gone." It is not always necessary to use a comma when the dependent clause follows the principal clause. "The ship was gone when he arrived".

5. To separate two clauses that are joined by such conjunctions as for, or, nor, but, though, etc. "He left early, for he needed his sleep."

6. To mark the omission of words:

"This aircraft is powered by piston engines; that one, by jets."

7. To separate items in an address and date --

"Department of Transport, Ottawa, Ontario, August 1st, 1953."

--and in the complimentary close:

"Yours truly,"

8 To separate the selective word in direct address:

"Gentlemen, please be seated."

9 To separate quotations in a sentence:

"The aircraft will depart on schedule", he said.

10 To separate emphasis phrases and contrasting ex-

pressions:

"He will not, under any circumstances, comply".

"It was he, not I, who complied."

To separate an introductory adverb clause from a following summary clause:

"Since it is known that he left on Thursday, we may expect him here to-day."

To separate a participial phrase from a summary clause:

"The voyage completed, the crew departed."

### THE SEMI-COLON:

The semi-colon is generally used to indicate more of a break than the comma, but less than the colon or period. There are well defined rules governing the use of the semi-colon and it should not be regarded as a loose substitute for the comma or period.

- 1 The semi-colon is used mainly between two independent clauses of equal value where there is no connective.

"Good writing is by no means the only aim of a Civil Servant; our Department requires that we be courteous and helpful to the Public."

- 2 When an explanatory expression leads into the second independent clause, the semi-colon should be used.

"A report should contain more than just a statement of fact; for example, many directives are based on the recommendations contained in reports."

- 3 A semi-colon normally precedes a conjunctive adverb.



"The instructions contained in the Order-in-Council are definite; therefore we cannot agree to your request."

- 4 The semi-colon is most helpful in giving clearness to a sentence in which the clauses are loosely related. Here is an example which is designed to demonstrate the interplay of comma and semi-colon.

"We learned that Mr. Jones, a senior official of the Department, was making a field trip; that his assistant, Mr. Smith, an expert on grain transportation, was in Halifax; but that Mr. Brown, normally resident in Montreal, was on temporary duty in Ottawa."

#### THE COLON:

This stop, which affords a greater degree of separation than the semi-colon, is useful when it is desired to stress a word, phrase, or statement that is to follow.

"A letter that will stand scrutiny on all five check points is a good letter: it will attain your objective: it will help your correspondent."

If the second or last of two or more independent clauses gives an amplification of the statement in the first clause, or gives a concrete example to highlight the statement, it should be preceded by a colon.

"Everything was ready for the voyage: steam was up, the crew on board, the weather excellent."

The colon is helpful when quoting within the sentence structure.

All that was needed was to begin: "Before I can deal with your claim..." Or again: "Your letter is acknowledged...."

The colon also has the functions of:

- (1) Introducing sub-paragraphs.
- (2) Introducing a list, or a series, of examples.
- (3) Following the salutation -- ("Dear Sir:")
- (4) Separating a title from a sub-title.
- (5) Separating hour and minute figures--(8:30 a.m.)

### THE PERIOD:

The period, or full stop, has the following main uses:

1. To mark the end of a sentence.
2. For use after every abbreviation (Mr., Mrs., P.M., lbs., etc.), except where not conventionally required (CBC, 1st, 2nd, 3rd, TCA.)
3. To indicate an omission. In this case three(...) are used.

NOTE: The period should always be placed inside quotation marks, and inside brackets or parentheses when they enclose a sentence.

### THE QUESTION MARK:

The question mark normally is placed at the end of every direct question, whether it is at the end of, or within, the sentence.

This rule, in our type of writing, is frequently set aside, as we often use a direct question as a declarative statement. As this type of construction is used in official correspondence, and rarely anywhere else, it is worthy of particular note.

"Will you please forward this material by air-mail."

"May we have your observations on this matter."

This type of phrase is used to bring courtesy to what otherwise might appear to be a flat order.

## THE EXCLAMATION POINT:

This type of punctuation rarely has a place in our correspondence. Its function is exclamatory, and serves to place emotional emphasis on a phrase or sentence.

"It is thought that this matter should be settled immediately!"

Such phrases imply a criticism or an impatience that scarcely fits in with our conception of what constitutes courteous and objective correspondence.

## THE DASH, PARENTHESES, AND BRACKETS:

The dash is usually confined to informal writing, but may be occasionally warranted in our correspondence. Improper use of the dash occurs fairly frequently in our correspondence. Here is an actual example:

"The number of days absence I am interested in is that for injuries only--not ordinary sick leave."

Here the writer has produced an ugly, unmanageable sentence and has had to resort to a dash to give it sense.

The rule should be: If you find yourself using a dash to straighten out the sense of a sentence, throw that sentence out and make a fresh start.

Commas, dashes, and parentheses are used to set off interpolated sentence elements; the closeness of the relationship between the interpolation and the rest of the sentence is indicated in that order.

"We learned that Mr. Jones, a senior official of the Department, was making a field trip."

"I have to inform you' used to be--perhaps still is--the most common."

"There have been some deviations from this policy (I can remember at least three), and more may occur."

## CHAPTER SIX

### FRAMEWORK AND CONSTRUCTION

In any governmental writing it is standard practice to limit the use of the personal pronoun to very senior officials, although we may occasionally be called upon to write a document for the signature of a senior official which requires its use. The great mass of our correspondence is written within the framework of the first person plural or the impersonal. It is necessary that we have a clear mental picture of the three types of constructions.

It should be noted at this point that the use of the impersonal construction is often the cause of the long, involved, opening phrase, as the writer seeks to get a "toe-hold" on his subject without involving his personality. This is a trap, and the best way to avoid it is to plunge into the subject matter immediately.

Sir Ernest Gowers has written a most thoughtful treatise on this subject, and although the problem differs somewhat in the British Civil Service, the pros and cons, the drawbacks and the pitfalls, are all so clearly discussed, that it is included here in its entirety.

*"The secret of devising the right framework for an official letter lies in finding the right answers to two questions. One is: how am I to start? The other is: to whom am I to attribute the sentiments, opinions and decisions that the letter contains? The old-fashioned full-dress official letter presents no difficulty. That must begin with the traditional "In reply to your letter of .... I am directed by the Secretary of State for .... to state for the information of the Lords Commissioners of ....". It must continue in the same strain. The signatory must efface his personality. He is nothing; his parliamentary chief is everything. Decisions and opinions must have an in-*



troductory "I am to say that ...." or "The Secretary of State (or for variety Mr. ...., or for further variety Mr. Secretary ....) has decided that ....". The style is perhaps pompous, but it has the charm of ancient custom, and it is quite easy to learn. It is easy to overdo also, and a warning not to overdo it is the only advice that need be given about it. Do not be too free with its well-starched frills -- "I am moreover to observe", "The Secretary of State cannot conceal from himself", "I am to ask that you will cause your Minister to be informed" -- and all that sort of thing. Even in the traditional field there is a salutary movement towards simplicity.

We find ourselves in more difficult country when we come to new fields of Governmental activity, and the correspondence that grows in such profusion there. I mean that part of an official's duty which consists in explaining to members of the public the provisions of the innumerable laws and regulations by which they are protected, guided, and restrained. For these the traditional style will not do. Not only is it too stiff, remote, and unfriendly, but also it is really too ridiculous to go on pretending that the Ministerial head of the department has been told anything about such letters. Everyone knows that they are sent on the responsibility of one of his subordinates, exercising a delegated authority. A new framework must be devised. Since a wholly satisfactory one has not yet, I believe, been found, it is worth while to examine the problem in some detail.

Everyone's inclination is to follow tradition at least to the point of beginning all replies "In reply to (or 'with reference to') your letter of ....". That brings us to our first difficulty. If we are forbidden to follow our natural inclination to continue "I am directed", as we have seen we must be, how are we to go on?

In detail the possibilities are infinite, but the main forms are few, "I have (or 'I am') to inform you" used to be — perhaps still is — the most common. But it is unsatisfactory, not to say silly, with its mysterious suggestion of some compulsion working undisclosed in the background. "I would inform you" is another popular variant. It is passable, but not to be commended, for its archaic use of would in the sense of "I should like to" makes it stiff, as though one were to say "I would have you know". "I should inform you", in the sense of "it is my duty to inform you" is also passable and sometimes useful. But it will not do always; it is less suitable for beginning than for picking up something at the end ("I should add", "I should explain however"). "I beg to inform you" will not do. "I regret to inform you" and "I am glad to inform you" will do nicely when there is anything to be glad or sorry about, but that is not always. "In reply to your letter... I wish to inform you" (which I have seen) is crushingly stiff; this also is almost like saying "I would have you know". The passive ("you are informed", "it is regretted", "it is appreciated") has an impersonal aloofness that ought to rule it out conclusively, but I have noticed that it is common. There remains the device of plunging straight into saying what you have to say without any introductory words. But this will not do as a continuation of "In reply to your letter". What is in reply to the letter is not the information, but the giving of it. It is nonsense to say "In reply to your letter of ... you have already had all the petrol you are entitled to", or "In reply to your letter of ... the Income Tax Law on personal allowances has been changed"

Must we then conclude that in this type of letter we ought to abandon the stock opening "In reply to your letter" unless we can continue naturally with "I am glad to tell you" or "I am sorry to have to tell you", or some such phrase? Perhaps. Nothing would be lost. There are plenty of other ways of beginning that will not lead us

into the same difficulties. The trouble about "In reply to your letter" is that it forms the beginning of a sentence which we must finish somehow. If we turn it into a complete sentence, we shake off those shackles.

This must be done with discretion; some attempts are unfortunate. For instance:

With reference to your claim. I have to advise you that before same is dealt with ...

There is no need to start with an ejaculatory and verbless clause. All that was needed was to begin: "Before I can deal with your claim ...". Or again:

"Your letter is acknowledged, and the following would appear to be the position."

"Receipt of your letter is acknowledged. It is pointed out ..."

Here again is the inhuman third person. The right way of saying what these two were trying to say is "Thank you for your letter. The position is (or the facts are) as follows ..."

I believe that a common opening formula during the war was:

"Your letter of the ... about ... We really cannot see our way ..."

I am told that this is fortunately dying out, perhaps because it is becoming less difficult to see our way.

Another not very happy effort is:

"I refer to recent correspondence and to the form which you have completed."

There is a faint air of bombast about this: it vaguely recalls Pistol's way of talking ("I speak of Africa and golden joys"). Probably "Thank you for the completed form" would have been an adequate opening.

There are, however, many possible ways of turning "with reference to your letter" into a complete sentence without getting ourselves into trouble.

"I have received your letter of ..."

"Thank you for your letter of ...."

"I am writing you in reply to your letter of ...."

"You wrote to me on such-and-such a subject ...."

"I have looked into the question of ... about which you wrote to me ... "And so on. All enable you to say what you have to say as a direct statement without any preliminary words like "I have to say" or "I would say".

There remains the second question. To whom are you to attribute the opinions and decisions which, having got over the first hurdle, you then proceed to deliver? In a large and increasing class of letters the answer is simple. These are the letters sent from those provincial offices of a Ministry that are in charge of an official who has a recognized status and title and who signs the letters himself. Such are Inspectors of Taxes, Collectors of Customs, the Regional Controllers of various Departments, Telephone Managers, and others. Everyone knows that these officers exercise a delegated authority; those who draft the letters for them to sign can use the first person, and all is plain sailing.

But a great many letters, sent from other branches of Government Departments are signed not by someone of known status and authority, but by some unknown person in the hierarchy, who may or may not have consulted higher authority before signing; that is a matter of domestic organization within the Department and is nobody else's business. To whom are the opinions and decisions conveyed in these letters to be attributed? It cannot be the Minister himself; we have ruled that out. There are four other poss-



ibilities. One is that the letter should be written in the first person, and that the official who signs it should boldly accept responsibility, tempered perhaps by the illegibility of his signature. The second is that responsibility should be spread by the use of the first person plural. The third is that it should be further diluted by attributing the decisions and opinions to "the Department". The fourth is that responsibility should be assigned to a quarter mystically remote by the use throughout of the impersonal passive. To illustrate what I mean, let us take what must to-day be the most common type of letter, one turning down an application:

"I have considered your application and do not think you have made out a case."

"We have considered your application and do not think you have made a case."

"The Department has (or have) considered your application and does (or do) not think you have made out a case."

"Your application has been considered and it is not thought that you have made out a case."

I cannot pretend to be an authoritative guide on the comparative merits of these; no doubt every Department makes its own rules. But there are three things that seem, to me, important.

First, in letters written in the first person be very careful to avoid giving the impression that an all-powerful individual is signifying his pleasure. If the letter grants what is asked for, never say that you are making a "concession". If it refuses a request never say, as in the example given, I do not think you have made out a case. Imply that your role is not to be your correspondent's judge, but is merely to decide how the case before you fits into the instructions under which you work.

Secondly, it is a mistake to mix these methods in one letter unless there is good reason for it. If you choose an impersonal method, such as "the Department", you may of course need to introduce the first person for personal purposes such as "I am glad" or "I am sorry" or "I should like you to call here", "I am glad to say that the Department has ....". But do not mix the methods merely for variety, saying I in the first paragraph, we in the second, the Department in the third, and it in the fourth. Choose one and stick to it.

Thirdly, avoid the impersonal passive, with its formal unsympathetic phrases such as "it is felt", "it is regretted", "it is appreciated". Your correspondent wants to feel that he is dealing with human beings, not with robots. How feeble is the sentence "It is thought you will now have received the form of agreement", compared with "I expect you will have received the form of agreement by now".

It will be fitting to end this section by giving an example of what seems to me an admirably written letter.

"I thank you for your letter of the 14th October, applying for telephone service F 2462, made available by the removal of Mr. X from 25 Station Road. I regret however that, owing to the large number of applicants who have prior claims to the line, it will not be possible to allow you to take over that telephone installation.

I am sorry to have to give you this decision since I realize just how useful a telephone would be to you. If you would like to have your name placed on the waiting list for a telephone at 25 Station Road, I shall be glad to have it recorded and to notify you as soon as telephone service can be given.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### DICTION

You will remember that during your course you saw a short movie on the subject of "Dictation". This picture gave some very graphic interpretations of the main "don'ts" on this subject. There was the man who could not find his previous correspondence and had only the haziest idea about what he wanted to dictate; there was the speed shark with the 200-word a minute delivery; the mumblor "bumbling" away behind his cigar; the walker, aiming dictation out of the window, at the walls, the carpet, everywhere except at his secretary; the man who liked to daydream while giving dictation; the one who held a stenographer through lengthy telephone calls; and all the others. These scenes represented definite dictation errors which occur often in many offices. Here is a résumé of the constructive facts on dictation that we discussed at the time.

Adopt permanent procedures which will be used constantly while dictating. It will help your stenographer to accustom herself to your methods, and will increase your speed and clarity of thought.

Take a good look at your present method of dictation and consult your stenographer. You may find that unknowingly you have allowed one or more "little habits" to creep in, which not only make the work more difficult for the person accepting your dictation, but which also may cause you yourself to be annoyed by a seeming lack of efficiency in your stenographer.

No stenographer can efficiently take down shorthand at speed in an uncomfortable position: have the stenographer seated within easy hearing distance.

State the number of copies required, always remembering

to order as few as possible as a saving in time and wasted paper.

Give the stenographer full instructions about spacing and general layout.

If you are dictating a short letter or simple draft, you should be able to dictate without notes, or at the most from a few key words jotted down in orderly sequence. If the matter is long or complicated, you should dictate from a skeleton of paragraph numbers and headings, with important or complicated sentences jotted down in rough.

If possible, give the stenographer the document to copy rather than dictate a piece of straight reading.

Be clear and decisive, both in thought and speech. The worst dictation of all is a series of frantic little rushes, mixed up with vague corrections, such as, "No, I don't mean that" or "Wash that out", etc. Such remarks leave a stenographer uncertain as to how much is cancelled.

Remember the difficulty of making insertions in shorthand notes.

Instruct the stenographer to tell you if the dictation is too fast or too slow. Aim at a pace and tone that is fairly even without being a monotone. If you have a piece of straight reading occurring in the middle of dictation, read the extract at a slow pace, otherwise you may jump from 70 or 80 words a minute to 130.

Give names, place names, references, technical terms, and unusual terms slowly, as they are normally taken down in longhand.

The amount of punctuation detail that should be given depends on your material and the ability of your stenograph-



er, but you should always indicate paragraphs, sub-paragraphs, and sub-sub-paragraphs.

Help your stenographer by indicating the urgency and priority of your work, and by providing letters or files so that addresses and references may be verified.

Always remember that stenography is a difficult and exacting job, and that helpfulness and consideration can make the difference between good and poor stenographic work in your unit.







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